

## TELEWORK AND TELEEMPLOYEE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR. A PERSPECTIVE ON THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD

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*Abstract: Our paper provides a concise overview of several observations regarding telework and teleworkers in the public sector, based on the premise that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on public organizations worldwide, forcing them to face unprecedented challenges. The public sector, responsible for a wide range of essential services, was confronted with the need to rapidly adapt its structures and procedures to ensure continuity of operations, while also complying with social distancing and other imposed restrictions. To this end, we used a relevant and recent bibliography, as well as certain regulatory documents. In terms of structure, the paper includes the following sections: (1) Considerations on the Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Public Sector; (2) Telework and the Regulation of Certain Rights and Obligations of Teleworkers in Romania; (3) Continuous Digitalization and Its Impact on Necessary Skills; (4) Redefining Communication and Collaboration within Organizations. The final section (5) presents our Conclusions.*

*Keyword: SARS-CoV-2; post-pandemic period; public sector; human resource management; changes/trends*

### **Considerations on some implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the public sector**

First, it should be noted that telework represents "a form of organizing and/or fulfilling tasks using information technology, within the framework of an employment contract/labor relationship, where the activity that could also be carried out at the employer's premises is regularly performed outside these premises." (RG, 2021). Consequently, typical telework activities involve "performing the duties specific to the position, occupation, or trade held by the teleworker, using information and communication technology, regularly and voluntarily, at a location other than the employer's premises. Additionally, these terms are established by the signatories of the individual employment contract, the internal regulations, and/or the applicable collective labor contract" (RG, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted public organizations worldwide, forcing them to confront unprecedented challenges. The public sector, responsible for a wide range of essential services, faced the need to rapidly adapt its structures and procedures to ensure continuity of operations while also complying with social distancing requirements and other imposed restrictions (Consolo and Dias da Silva, 2022). This situation highlighted the necessity for digital transformation and flexibility, both in work organization and in interactions between employees and the served public (Koch, 2021; Kul, 2021; Lazăr Pleșa et al., 2020).

The implementation of telework and various digital solutions aimed at maximizing efficiency (Figure 1) has had a substantial impact on the organizational strategies adopted.

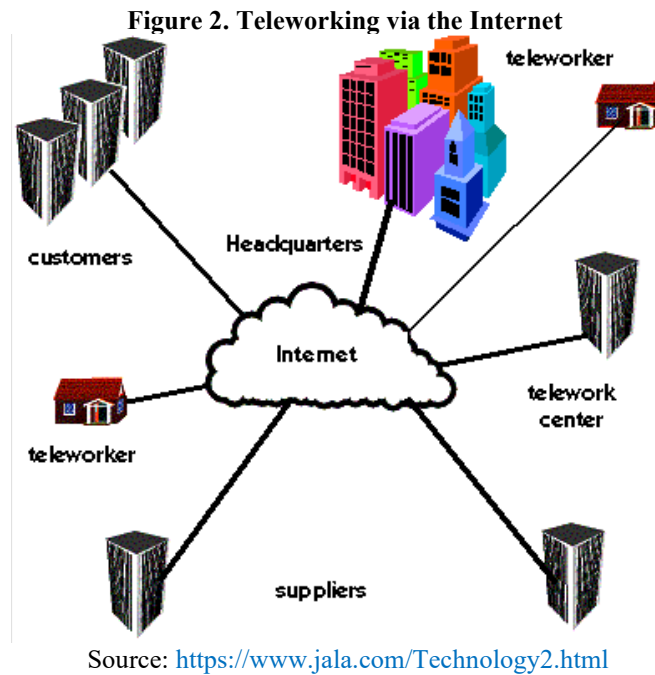
Figure 1. Effective remote work management

	Managers	Employees
<b>Adaptability</b> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Amplify the technology (software, hardware, web applications) and capabilities needed to enable telework.</b> Listen to the IT team. Rapidly inject resources needed for IT infrastructure and training.</li> <li><b>2. Expect problems and issues and be prepared to capture and share what is working as well as problems that need to be solved.</b> Ask for feedback and solicit ideas – be a model for continuous improvement.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Leverage the technology offered by the company.</b> Provide feedback if there are issues with technology. Ask for guidelines and trainings where necessary.</li> <li><b>2. Use this as a learning opportunity for you and for your colleagues.</b> Share your learnings about what works and what does not work with your co-workers so that the organizational competence to telework continually grows.</li> </ol>
<b>Mission</b> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>3. Go on hyper-drive with prioritization.</b> Emphasize the biggest priorities so that employees know what to focus on.</li> <li><b>4. Encourage employees to ask questions about company, team, and individual priorities</b> in 1:1s, staff meetings, and town halls.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>3. Focus on the priorities;</b> Not everything on your plate is equally important.</li> <li><b>4. Ask questions</b> to gain clarity about the priorities and recognize that, in this environment, those priorities can change at a moment's notice.</li> </ol>
<b>Consistency</b> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>5. Communicate often and consistently.</b> Uncertain times require significantly higher levels of communication and it is important that consistent information and guidance is shared. Invoke the core values in communications for reassurance and stability.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>5. Use the company's core values as the north star</b> in times of change. Core values can help us cut through the ambiguity and uncertainty and act in ways that reflect what is most important. If you are hearing conflicting messages, ask for clarification.</li> </ol>
<b>Involvement</b> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>6. Listen to employees</b> to understand their challenges and their suggestions for how to best support them.</li> <li><b>7. Empower employees</b> in how they want to manage their work schedule and work hours. Allow for flexibility (vs. rigidity) with emphasis on clarifying the work requirements and the critical interdependencies that need to be considered.</li> <li><b>8. Maintain equity</b> in how telework is implemented for employees.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>6. Determine and communicate your own work schedule;</b> be comfortable that it may change frequently based on competing home and work priorities. Be sensitive to others who depend on you and your work and stay in close communication.</li> <li><b>7. Don't hesitate to ask for meetings to be short</b> (30 minutes), if you have family members that need care on a more frequent basis.</li> <li><b>8. Take care of your personal well-being and the well-being of those who depend on you.</b></li> </ol>

Source: <https://denisonconsulting.com/transform/managing-telework-covid19>

The pandemic accelerated the transition to new work models, such as remote work and telework, initially seen as temporary solutions but which proved essential for the efficient management of human resources in public organizations (Zilincikova and Stofkova, 2021). As a result, the need for adaptability has increased, and digitalization has become a priority to support effective communication and collaboration, both internally and externally (Mazzucato and Kattel, 2020; Nilles, 2020). Public institutions have been compelled to make substantial investments in communication technologies and cybersecurity to create a secure and reliable virtual work environment (Hhs.gov, 2020).

Consequently, videoconferencing platforms, messaging applications, project management solutions, and enhanced internet capabilities (Figure 2) have become nearly indispensable for the execution of various activities.



In practice, a hybrid work model has also been adopted, allowing public sector employees to alternate between working in the office and from home. Furthermore, hybrid work has led to a reevaluation of performance criteria, with employee assessments focusing more on results achieved rather than physical presence, promoting greater autonomy and responsibility among employees. As a result, managers have had to adopt new supervision and evaluation approaches, based on clear, measurable objectives, and to promote an adaptive leadership style responsive to the needs of hybrid teams.

### **Telework and the regulation of rights and obligations of teleworkers in Romania**

In Romania, telework is regulated by Law No. 81/2018 (RP, 2018), which defines telework as a “form of work organization where the employee, on a regular and voluntary basis, performs specific tasks of their role, occupation, or profession in a location other than the employer’s workplace, at least one day per month, using information and communication technology.” Of course, teleworkers—employees working remotely—are entitled to all rights provided by labor legislation, internal regulations, and collective agreements applicable to employees who work at the employer’s office or residence. Additionally, teleworkers may be entitled to a series of additional rights, such as funds for covering telework-related expenses—utilities, internet connections, office equipment, and other necessary resources. Labor laws are increasingly evolving to protect teleworkers and ensure fair working conditions, regardless of their place of work (Morariu, 2021).

A comprehensive study on the feasibility of introducing flexible work arrangements in the public administration sector (telework, flexible hours, part-time work, hybrid systems, etc.) (INA, 2020) highlighted significant openness from both managers and staff for such

solutions. Key preferences identified include spatial flexibility (telework and working from home) and temporal flexibility (flexible schedules, individualized hours, and the possibility of accruing additional hours in a “time bank” for future time off). Regarding the implementation of telework and work from home, the study found that the main challenges faced, both at the managerial level and by staff, were technical (lack of suitable equipment and electronic signatures) and procedural (absence of clear procedures for remote work and effective task monitoring). Challenges also arose in accessing information and team coordination, as well as social issues such as feelings of isolation from colleagues and the perception that working from home required less effort.

On the other hand, the study identified several advantages of introducing flexible work modes. Firstly, these led to an increase in employee safety and motivation, as institutions demonstrated an adaptable and supportive approach. Additionally, employees’ ability to concentrate improved due to fewer interruptions from colleagues or supervisors. The transition to these flexible work modes has also contributed to developing digital skills and autonomy in managing tasks, which can help create a more efficient future for public administration in rapidly changing contexts.

In conclusion, the study recommends that work flexibility be supported through investments in digital equipment and training, clarification of remote monitoring and coordination procedures, and the implementation of solutions to mitigate the effects of isolation, thus contributing to a more resilient and adaptable public administration.

Returning to the provisions of Law No.81/2018 (Art.7), the employer has specific obligations regarding the occupational health and safety of teleworkers, including: “a) providing information technology and communication tools and/or safe work equipment necessary to perform the work, unless otherwise agreed by the parties; b) installing, inspecting, and maintaining the necessary work equipment, unless otherwise agreed by the parties; c) providing conditions for the teleworker to receive sufficient and appropriate training in health and safety at work, especially in the form of information and work instructions specific to the telework activity and the use of visual display equipment” (RP, 2018).

Regarding the obligations of the teleworker, these include: “a) informing the employer about the equipment used and the conditions at the telework location and allowing access where possible, to implement and maintain the necessary health and safety measures according to the employment contract or for the investigation of incidents; b) not altering the health and safety conditions at the telework location; c) using only work equipment that does not pose a risk to their health and safety; d) performing their work in compliance with the obligations of workers and in accordance with the provisions of the employment contract; e) complying with specific rules and restrictions established by the employer regarding the use of internet networks and equipment provided” (Law No.81/2018, Art.8, para. 2).

For certain teleworkers, recent legislative proposals to amend the Labor Code introduce new regulations on teleworkers’ rights. Among the proposed changes (Oprea, 2024) are: (i) Extending the telework period for parents of children with disabilities, allowing them to work remotely 8 days per month, double the current limit of 4 days; (ii) Increasing the age limit for telework: The proposal allows parents of children with disabilities to benefit from 8 telework days monthly until the child reaches 18, up from the current limit of 11 years; (iii) Teleworkers with multiple children with disabilities: Parents of more than one

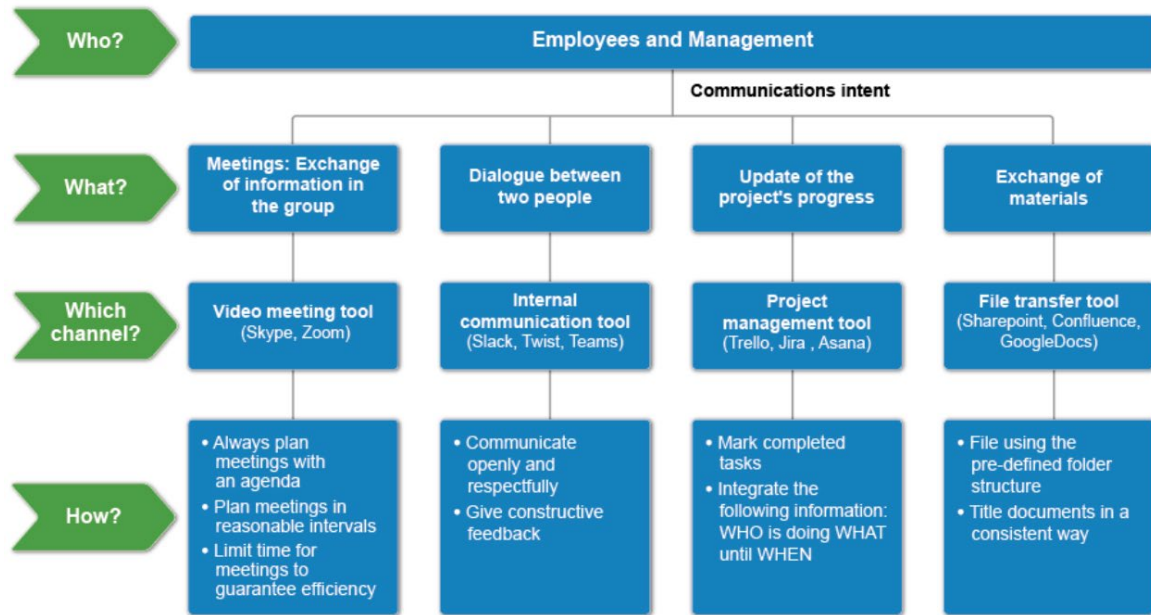
child with disabilities would receive two additional telework days on top of the basic 8 days; (iv) Protection of teleworkers’ rights: Employers would not be allowed to unilaterally revoke these benefits through internal regulations, providing added stability for these facilities.

Currently, a tax-free allowance applies to teleworkers, exempting the amounts they receive for utility expenses—such as electricity, water, heating, data services, and office furniture purchases—within a limit set by the employer of up to 400 RON per month. This allowance is calculated proportionally to the number of telework days each month (RG, 2022). These measures reflect a legislative effort to adapt labor laws to the complex needs of teleworkers and ensure a favorable framework for balancing work and family life.

**Continuous digitalization and the impact on required skills**

As the public sector continues to integrate digital technologies into its operations, the skills required of employees have changed significantly, with digital competencies becoming a priority in the recruitment, training, and professional development of public sector staff. The use of communication technologies, online collaboration applications, and process automation solutions (Figure 3) has become crucial for operational efficiency and for improving interaction with citizens.

**Figure 3. Communication chart for virtual teams**



Source: <https://www.humrro.org/corpsite/blog/effective-virtual-management-skills-for-covid-19-teleworking/#>

As a result, public institutions have invested in continuous training programs aimed at developing employees' digital skills. These programs include both training sessions for using basic digital tools and advanced courses in data management and cybersecurity, tailored to the specifics of public sector activities. By developing these skills, employees are prepared to use technology efficiently and meet the increasing demands for adaptability and innovation. In addition, the heightened requirements for digital competencies have changed employee selection criteria, especially in areas like data analysis, information

security, and digital application development. Thus, continuous digitalization, within an increasingly complex managerial context (Burciu et al., 2008), is a significant factor contributing to the modernization of human resources in the public sector, supporting the transition toward a more efficient administration that is aligned with citizens' needs.

### Redefining communication and collaboration within organizations

In the post-pandemic period, communication and collaboration have been redefined to meet the needs of distributed teams and maintain organizational cohesion. Public institutions have adopted digital communication and collaboration tools that allow employees to stay connected and work together efficiently, even when working remotely. These tools, such as video conferencing platforms, document-sharing applications, and project management solutions, have become essential for daily activities. Furthermore, when discussing telework activities in general, we should consider advantages such as (Hhs.gov, 2020): “Increase employee effectiveness • Increase management achievement of goals • Avoid delays associated with commute • Reduce office distractions • Reduce real estate costs/requirements • Increased employee morale due to improved quality of life • Commute – saves time and money • Work environment – familiarity, comfort, relaxed dress code • Personal costs – Attire, purchasing meals • Business continuity in the event of an emergency/disaster • Decentralized and distributed work is becoming more common.” At least six key reasons support the adoption of this type of work activity (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Reasons for telework adoption



Source: Hhs.gov, 2020

New forms of communication require adjustments to organizational culture, promoting openness, transparency, and accessibility of information. Team and interdepartmental communication is now more structured and results-oriented, leading to increased efficiency and reduced time needed for coordinating activities (Lund et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2024). Additionally, promoting a balance between professional and personal life has become a priority in retention strategies. Hybrid work allows employees greater flexibility,

enhancing satisfaction and reducing the risk of burnout (Goldberg and Priest, 2023). Public institutions that adopt these measures and provide support to employees adapting to new work demands are more likely to retain talent in the long term.

## **Conclusions**

Our paper confirms that telework was a necessary and effective solution for maintaining continuity of activities in public institutions, enabling compliance with social distancing rules and a swift adaptation to a global crisis context. Regulations regarding the rights and obligations of teleworkers in Romania are generally effective but still need adjustments to better meet the specific needs of the public sector. Telework has emphasized the importance of ongoing digitalization, which, in parallel, highlighted an increased demand for digital skills and adaptability among employees. Another important observation is that telework has redefined communication and collaboration within public organizations, shifting from physical interactions to virtual platforms, which has brought both benefits and challenges. In the long term, to maximize the efficiency and sustainability of telework, we recommend continuous updating of employees' digital skills, enhancing the legal framework for greater flexibility, and ensuring access to modern technological resources. Additionally, adapting organizational culture to support remote collaboration will be essential for the long-term success of telework in the public sector.

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